

TESTIMONY

of

JOHN D. RYAN

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

for the

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

**“Protecting Vulnerable Children:
Preventing and Addressing Sex Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care”**

October 23, 2013

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I welcome the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the problem of sex trafficking of youth in foster care. We are grateful for the Subcommittee's concern for this particularly vulnerable segment of our youth population.

The scope of the problem of child sex trafficking is difficult to quantify with accuracy. The reluctance of victims to self-identify and the challenges in law enforcement investigations make it impossible to gauge the incidence of this type of crime. There have been studies estimating the number of children with characteristics that *may* put them *at risk* for commercial sexual exploitation, including being a runaway, being in foster care or affiliated with a gang.¹ No empirical studies exist that estimate the number of children currently being sold in the sex trafficking industry nationwide. However, 1 out of 8 of the endangered runaways reported to NCMEC in 2012 were likely sex trafficking victims. This number has tripled since we started comparing missing children to trafficked children.

The issue of child sex trafficking is complex. In the real world, children are being sold on the streets, in hotels and in casinos. In the online world, they are being advertised on a variety of websites. Their "pimps" can be perceived friends or boyfriends, or even family members or foster parents. It is a unique type of child victimization.

As you know, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children ("NCMEC") is a private, not-for-profit corporation, designated by Congress and working in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice. NCMEC is a public-private partnership, funded in part by Congress and in part by the private sector. For almost 30 years NCMEC has operated under Congressional authority to serve as the national resource center and clearinghouse on missing and exploited children. This statutory authorization (see 42 U.S.C. §5773) specifies 22 operational functions, including:

¹ Estes, Richard J. and Weiner, Neil Alan, *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children In the U.S., Canada and Mexico, Executive Summary of the U.S. National Study*, University of Pennsylvania, 2001, pp. 11-12. Characteristics also included drug use, and child sexual abuse.

- operate a national 24-hour toll-free hotline, 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678), to intake reports of missing children and receive leads about ongoing cases;
- operate the CyberTipline, an online reporting mechanism that the public and electronic service providers may use to report Internet-related child sexual exploitation;
- provide technical assistance and training to individuals and law enforcement agencies in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and exploited children;
- track the incidence of attempted child abductions;
- providing forensic technical assistance to law enforcement;
- facilitate the deployment of the National Emergency Child Locator Center during periods of national disasters;
- work with law enforcement and the private sector to reduce the distribution of child pornography over the Internet;
- operate a child victim identification program to assist law enforcement in identifying victims of child pornography;
- develop and disseminate programs and information about Internet safety and the prevention of child abduction and sexual exploitation;
- provide technical assistance and training to law enforcement in identifying and locating non-compliant sex offenders;
- coordinate with child welfare agencies and law enforcement in the reporting of children missing from the foster care system;
- provide technical assistance to law enforcement in identifying, locating and recovering victims of child sex trafficking.

NCMEC has three decades of experience with missing child cases. When a child goes missing the first call should always be to law enforcement and the second call should be to our national toll-free hotline, 1-800-THE-LOST®(1-800-843-5678). Our hotline has handled more than 3.8 million calls. Case management teams within NCMEC's Missing Children Division provide technical assistance to law enforcement and provide support to the missing child's family.

Our Critical and Runaway Unit includes specialized case management teams to handle cases in which the missing child is also a possible child sex trafficking victim. They coordinate the creation and dissemination of posters to generate tips and leads, all of which are sent to the investigating law enforcement agency. NCMEC works closely with approximately 300 corporate photo partners who disseminate photos of missing children to millions of homes across the U.S. every day.

Our longest-running program to help prevent the sexual exploitation of children is the CyberTipline, the national clearinghouse for leads and tips regarding crimes against children on the Internet. It is operated in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”), the Department of Homeland Security’s Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”), the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the U.S. Secret Service, the Military Criminal Investigative Organizations, the Internet Crimes Against Children (“ICAC”) Task Forces, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, and other state and local law enforcement.

We receive reports in eight categories of crimes against children:

- possession, manufacture and distribution of child pornography;
- online enticement of children for sexual acts;
- child sex trafficking;
- sex tourism involving children;
- extra familial child sexual molestation;
- unsolicited obscene material sent to a child;
- misleading domain names; and
- misleading words or digital images on the Internet.

These reports are made by both the public and by Electronic Service Providers (“ESPs”), who are required by law to report apparent child pornography to law enforcement via the CyberTipline (18 U.S.C. §2258A). The leads are reviewed by NCMEC analysts, who examine and evaluate the content, add related information that would be useful to law enforcement; use publicly-available search tools to determine the geographic location of the apparent criminal conduct; and provide all information to the appropriate law enforcement agency for

investigation. These reports are triaged continuously to ensure that reports involving children in imminent danger get first priority.

The FBI, ICE and Postal Inspection Service have direct and immediate access to all CyberTipline reports, and each agency assigns agents and analysts to work at NCMEC headquarters. In the 15 years since the CyberTipline began, NCMEC has received and processed more than 2.1 million reports. ESPs have reported to the CyberTipline more than 12 million images/videos of sexually exploited children. The analysts in our Child Victim Identification Program (“CVIP”) have reviewed more than 98 million child pornography images and videos. CVIP assists prosecutors by connecting seized images with the case agent who can identify the child depicted as an actual child, and helps law enforcement to locate and rescue child victims who have not yet been identified. Last week alone, CVIP analysts reviewed more than 964,000 images/videos.

As the role of the Internet in child sex trafficking has increased, reports to the CyberTipline of children suspected of being sold for sex online have also increased. In 2012 alone the CyberTipline received over 800 reports a month from the public and ESPs regarding possible child sex trafficking. All the reports are referred to law enforcement for possible investigation, specifically the ICAC Task Forces² and FBI Innocence Lost Task Forces.

Ten years ago NCMEC began its partnership with the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, in the Innocence Lost National Initiative. Created in 2003, this initiative addresses the problem of child sex trafficking through the creation of local and regional task forces and working groups; targeted, coordinated sweeps known as Operation Cross Country; and ongoing support for trafficking investigations. These 66 dedicated task forces and working groups have rescued more than 2,700 child victims and arrested more than 1,300 pimps and their associates – the convictions of which have included several life sentences.

² The ICAC Task Force program is a national network of 61 coordinated Task Forces representing over 3,000 federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies. ICAC Task Forces were created to help Federal, State and local law enforcement agencies enhance their investigative responses to offenders who use the Internet, online communication systems, or computer technology to sexually exploit children. The program is funded by the United States Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

NCMEC's role in the initiative is to be a clearinghouse for information obtained from the public and ESPs about children being exploited through sex trafficking; to provide analytical and technical assistance services to law enforcement investigating these cases; and to dedicate case management support for missing children victimized through sex trafficking.

NCMEC also supports the Innocence Lost National Initiative through its Child Sex Trafficking Team (CSTT). This team is a specialized group of analysts which handles all law enforcement requests related to child sex trafficking. The CSTT provides comprehensive analytical services to law enforcement investigations, and links cases of possible child sex trafficking victims to missing child cases known to NCMEC.

Our Child Sex Trafficking Team provides 24/7 analytical support and technical assistance during Operation Cross Country. Using public records databases and cross-referencing our Missing Children and CyberTipline databases, we provide information on potential child victims, and suspected pimps and their associates, to the Innocence Lost Task Forces through the FBI agents assigned to work at our headquarters.

During Operation Cross Country VII, in August of this year, CSTT analysts assisted officers in more than 230 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, which led to the rescue of 105 children and the arrest of 150 pimps who are accused of exploiting them. Compared to last year's Operation, this was a 32% increase in the number of children recovered and a 43% increase in the number of pimps arrested. Many children rescued during the seven Operations conducted to date had been reported to NCMEC as missing children.

The youngest child rescued in this year's Operation was 13 years old.

When they hear the term "child trafficking," most Americans think that it only happens somewhere else, such as Southeast Asia or Central America. Even if they acknowledge that trafficking happens in the United States, they assume the victims are foreign children brought into this country in order to be sold for sex in large cities.

In fact, we have learned that most of the victims of child sex trafficking in our country are American kids – most of whom initially leave home voluntarily and who end up being trafficked on Main Street, USA. One police officer described it this way: “the only way not to find this problem in any community is simply not to look for it.”

An often-overlooked aspect of child sex trafficking is that it is also a problem of missing children. Many child sex trafficking victims are missing from their parents, legal guardians or foster care placements. Approximately 81% of the missing children reported to NCMEC are endangered runaways.³ These children represent the most vulnerable children in our country. Traffickers know this. They actively target runaways and then lure them into the sex trade using psychological manipulation, illegal drugs and violence. Any child may be vulnerable to someone who promises to meet their emotional or physical needs, but children with no permanent home are particularly vulnerable. Children in foster care are easy targets for pimps. These children are the most susceptible to the manipulation and false promises that traffickers use to secure their trust and dependency. These children have fractured safety nets and few alternatives.

Of the children reported missing to NCMEC in 2012 who are likely child sex trafficking victims, 67% were in the care of social services or foster care when they ran.

The exploitation of America’s children through sex trafficking is a complicated problem that involves numerous aspects of both the child welfare system and the criminal justice system. I am not here to condemn either system – they are both overwhelmed, under resourced and not designed to address this type of harm to children. However, our data demonstrates that traffickers are indeed targeting youth involved in child welfare. We must acknowledge our responsibility to protect these children from those who will use them and discard them. Both systems must adapt to this reality.

The most important thing we can do is to change the conversation from a juvenile delinquency issue to a child protection issue. These children lack the ability to just walk away from their

³ There is no mandate to report missing children to NCMEC, so the data that we have does not represent the full scope of the problem. The data only reflects what has been reported to us.

pimps. They must be recognized as victims who must be rescued and given appropriate services. Because of this, NCMEC is prioritizing efforts to urge all state child welfare agencies to report missing foster children to law enforcement and then to NCMEC.

Reporting children missing from care to local law enforcement is a critical step. However, as we learn more about traffickers' business model and the dynamics of pimp control, we've realized that this step alone is not enough. The constant movement of these victims, frequently between states, creates challenges for law enforcement investigating missing child cases.

Because NCMEC sits at the intersection of child welfare and criminal justice, children who are intaked into our system will be flagged for law enforcement during their trafficking investigations. The additional reporting of missing foster children to NCMEC creates a safety net for these children. It triggers the deployment of NCMEC's numerous resources in support of law enforcements' efforts to bring them home. Currently Florida and Illinois send reports of their missing foster children to NCMEC. Florida sends reports pursuant to state law and Illinois by agency regulation. Our formal partnership with Florida streamlines the process of their additional reporting to NCMEC. We look forward to other states following their lead.

In addition to reporting, there must be comprehensive, widely-available training for child welfare agencies on how to properly identify and respond to children who have been victimized through sex trafficking. Child welfare staff – including social workers, foster families and the staff at residential treatment facilities and group homes – must be able to recognize indicators of sex trafficking victimization and then implement trauma-informed policies and procedures designed for the needs of these victims.

A comprehensive child protection response must also include prevention education for all children within the child welfare system. Children are recruited in schools, shopping malls, bus stops, foster care/group homes and on social networking sites. Prevention education will empower foster youth with the tools to recognize common approaches and lures used by traffickers as well as the resources to resist them.

We are encouraged by Congressional action on this issue. Not only did this Congress pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, it is currently working on several bills to address critical aspects of this problem. Some of the bills with which we are familiar are:

Child Sex Trafficking Data and Response Act (H.R. 2744)

Child Welfare Response to Human Trafficking Act (H.R. 1732)

End Sex Trafficking Act (H.R. 2805)

Improving Outcomes for Youth At Risk for Sex Trafficking Act (S. 1518)

In closing, Mr. Chairman, the National Center sees the potential for real progress in addressing child sex trafficking in the U.S. We are grateful for this Subcommittee's focus on foster children as particularly vulnerable to this type of victimization. Thank you for your efforts to wake up America and respond more effectively to this epidemic of hidden victims.